

Interview: Cena, John (Veteran)
Year: 2003
Notes: Served in the Army Air Corps, Boston University, Ohio College of Medicine

PEABODY INSTITUTE LIBRARY: ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Name: Dr. John Cena M.D.
Date: June 5, 2003
Place: Peabody Veterans Memorial High School
Interviewer: George G. Gay

Project Series: Veterans History Project

Summary of transcript:

Dr. John Cena was born in Illinois, but moved to Peabody when he was an infant. He attended Peabody High School and after graduation he wanted to go to college. However, Cena notes that money was tight and he was unable to go right away. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps and received training at Fort Slocum and then Pearl Harbor. He was stationed at Wheeler Army Airfield on Oahu. Cena was getting ready to go to Mass when the Japanese started bombing Pearl Harbor. The first wave of Japanese fighters took out the planes and the second wave took out the ships. Because the men did not have rifles, they could not fight back. During the attack Cena injured his leg and was sent home afterwards. He received treatment at Bushnell General Hospital near Ogden, Utah.

After being discharged, he took the bus back to Peabody so that he could see the country. Once he returned, Cena attended Berkley Preparatory School because he believed that he was not yet ready for college. Then he went to Boston University, followed by the Ohio College of Podiatric Medicine. Cena returned to Peabody and set up his podiatry practice and worked for forty years. At the time of his interview he had been retired for ten years and was enjoying life.

Although Cena had animosity toward the Japanese because of what he witnessed at Pearl Harbor he has learned to forgive. His life has turned out the way he wanted – a successful podiatry practice, a fifty-six year marriage, and a daughter and grandchildren. His final advice to others is not to give up.

Search Terms: Army Air Corps; Boston University; Cena, John; Fort Slocum; Kolekole Pass; Ohio College of Medicine; Peabody; Pearl Harbor; Podiatry; Waikakalaua

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John Cena
Narrator

George G. Gay
Peabody Veterans Memorial High School
Interviewer

June 5, 2003
At Peabody Veterans Memorial High School
Peabody, Massachusetts

GG: Hello. Can you start off telling us your name and a little bit about yourself? Where you're from and your life leading up to the war?

JC: My name is Dr. John Cena. I spent most of my life in Peabody. I was born in Illinois, but came to Peabody when I was only about three or four months old; I've been here every since. I went to Peabody High School. I graduated and then I wanted to go to college. In those days [Short pause] there wasn't much money around so I didn't have any so I looked around and I finally talked with one of the individuals who was studying a course on the Army Air Corps. And... So I decided that, after thinking of many things, this was the best avenue I could take to try to get an education.

So I joined and I was sent out to Fort Slocum and from there I was sent out to Oahu, which is one of the islands in Hawaii.¹ I got my training out there because back here it was different than out there. So I was assigned to a fighter group. It was the 7th Air Wing and the 18th Pursuit Group. We had... P40s and P38s and 36s, which were fighters. And the P40... was one of the first planes we had that was with new firepower put into the wings. What happened is the... it had one, two, three – one, two, three on either side [were] 50 caliber machine guns. And when you let that go power was so intense that it almost feels like... the plane [Short pause] But I... funny part... I was... working around... I never really got what I wanted to do because things began to change very rapidly there. We could see

¹ Fort Slocum is located on Davis Island in New York. It was closed in 1965.

that something was coming along that didn't sound nice to us. I just had that gut feeling because I also carried that revolved in the Air Force. And they gave us live ammunition, which we never carried before. What they did was... they had a password and every night they would change the password because if you were out at night and called out for something or an individual would always ask what the password was. If they didn't give it then you had orders to come forward and if you don't then you had orders to shoot. This was bad... because we had all these planes especially the P40s on the field. So [Short pause] low and behold after awhile, I was taken out and I was put out on security something that I really didn't know anything about but they needed it because what the Islands have a vast majority of Japanese ancestry and they were afraid of saboteurs because we used to keep the planes out on the field in big bunkers [Uses hands to show how big]. They went up about 15 feet high and you backed the plane in. If they were going to do anything they won't get all of them. What happens... sure enough they decided that was the procedure to follow so they brought all the planes in, lined them up on the ramp going down facing each other. Probably 40 or 50 new P40s that came in. I'm always thinking this didn't feel right to me. Any place you went you had to carry your gun, the helmet, the steel helmet we had, and a gasmask. If you were caught without it you could be really in serious trouble. So anyway, being security we had [to] check all of the areas to make sure that everything was functioning properly. That day just before we get hit at the 7th I went downtown and with fellas we saw a couple of movies and then we got back and I went to bed. Then in the morning, usually that was Sunday, I usually always I get up to go to mass. I was just putting on my clothes when I herd this rat a tat tat tat it was the fire from their Japanese planes would come in through Kolekole Pass, which is a pass that separated... [Uses hands to show the pass] there are a lot of mountains there. They didn't have the altitude you have today with planes. They are coming in about 5,000 feet. So they come through that way and that comes right directly in front of Wheeler Field, where we were stationed at that was the pursuit group.² Up further down at Peal was the bomber group that was the 17th...

² Wheeler Field is located near Honolulu.

They had the B17s and the B24s down there. We were up so high, that we could see them very plainly because being high and we could see what was going on. So I just... just had that feeling that something is wrong here. As I was dressing I heard some more boom boom boom boom. I looked out the window and just went by a Japanese plane [Raises hands in the air.] One of those big red [Unclear]. Those [Unclear] swore like a [Unclear]. Those are Japs, the son of a guns. And they started to really spray everything, you know? Then they came back, and they finally got in where the planes were and they hit them. There was probably say thirty or forty there. They just started to burn and boom and that heavy aviation gas high octane. They were burning like the devil, and I'm saying, "Oh my God what do we do now?" So they, everybody started to come out and were trying to see if we could save some of the planes and get them out of the hangers. So as they were doing that they were shooting at the same time. You didn't even think of it you just had to do what you were trained to do and you did it, regardless. We were very fortunate that none of us were really seriously injured. I hurt my leg going down fell right on the concrete, and I hurt it. I never said anything about it because I figure, meh, it's nothing. The planes kept coming in. Then we just... There was nothing much you could do. Get a 45 in my hand and shoot with the thing; I couldn't hit a deer if it was in front of me. We waited and then the second wave come in. There were two waves. The second wave come in and they started to just... machine gun everything that was there. We were very fortunate, though, that way on the other side of the field we had some bombs that were just laying that. There was no place to put them. They had this civilian group that were building... These big tunnels in the side of the mountain right adjacent to our field to store all this stuff. In the mean time, I'm standing there and I'm going "Oh my God" if they ever hit any of that... you wouldn't find us... Dynamite, boxes and boxes that they used to... make the holes in the mountains. Fortunately nothing happened. See the next day, we got out to check everything and look around and oh my God, it was awful. We're very fortunate that we didn't lose that many men right at that area but the rest of the areas I understand afterwards when I was getting into this situation to look up what had actually happened, we lost about... including the army, the navy, the marine corps, and coast guard about 2,700 men. I don't know how many were

really injured because from our area, our viewpoint, we could see down at Pearl [Harbor] where the battleships were all tied up. Now they are hitting them. You could see them really blow up it was terrible. We were probably say, fifteen miles away, yet it sounded like you were right there; that's how bad it was. We didn't know exactly what was going on because we couldn't do a heck of a lot from where we were. So I'm saying to myself "Oh my God, those poor guys." I don't think they stood a chance in those big destroyers, the battlewagons they had there. And after it was all over they were really crippled. We were very fortunate that... They didn't try to get them out of there and go into the channel because if they did that would be it. Bang, you shut the whole thing down because there was one way in and one way out. That's all you had over there. It was wonderful for protection, but if anything got in... A few got away, but when they were starting to get hit they went on the side and just grounded the ship right there in order not to block the entrance coming in. From then on it was just wait and see. Everything... crew was running around, this had happened and that had happened. So they said "We've got to put security tight everywhere because they were afraid of what little we had left would blow. But an interesting thing happened that day. I don't know if you've seen... there was a movie they made about Pearl Harbor. There was Welch and Kalaya they were pursuit groups out in Waikakalaua. We had emergency landing field and they were training how to land on these mates they put out, steel mates. And it is not like a nice runway you had so boom boom. They were listening on the radio so they got in jumped in their car and off they go and vroom off they go to Waikakalaua. They get into their planes the 40s, they had two of them. They get up they get into the formation at the end and each one of them knocked down one or two planes and they had to turn around and come back because the fuel is low and no ammo. So they come back and they were decorated, Welch is a little guy like I am and he was a terrific pilot. He was made for the job. I guess him and Welch got quite a good good good feeling was wonderful for a change. And then after awhile they sent them back to the states to sell bonds and stuff, you know, and we were there and I'm waiting, so, oh boy. So anyway.

After a while the leg started to bother me so they sent me to the hospital, Tripler General, which is a big hospital in right in Honolulu. They took one look and said there is nothing much they can do for you, we're going to send you home. So they, I get in one of the transports they put me back and I wind up at Wright-Patterson Field in New Jersey. They took one "We'll send you to the general hospital out in Utah." Now here I am from there to there to there to there. So I went to Bushnell General Hospital in Utah. And they operated on me and did pretty good. I was there for about six months with rehab to get me back going and all of that. They didn't want anybody to come in and see the boys because this place was... some of the things you see was unreal. And I love to take pictures and photography... so and this other kid is on a bed beside of me. I remember when the doctor came in to look at he and he says "He liked the same thing." Now this kid lost both of his hands [Holds up hands and makes a fists] two hands were missing. Jimmy Farara, I'll never forget his name. Met him there and he was there maybe three or four months, you know, because I use to go out and take pictures and come in and develop them. I'd go out, so Jimmy had a heck of a time; he just didn't want to get along anymore. Why don't you go to town, it's only about 12 miles from Ogden so we decided this one day, and we went to town. The only problem we got there is everybody is looking. Jimmy's got no hands and I'm walking around with crutches. We walked by a couple and they were muttering and Jimmy got a little tight he says let's get out of here, let's go back. We go out we go to the hospital. So we get back to the hospital and then we go there and we started to take a few pictures just so we could take the mind off of what happened. Jimmy was supposed to go home and he was engaged to this girl, but he would never write. He didn't want nobody to see him. It was terrible; he couldn't do anything. If he came into the room and you closed the door... he couldn't get out. I mean simple things you look at... he use to tell me "I can't do that drawing." No hands, so finally they did a tremendous amount of work on him and they were going to put a hand on him. What they did is they made incisions on either side of the [shows interviewer where on the arm] area here and they grafted his skin in between and they made a false hand for him. This hand could open and close like this [Demonstrates how the hand worked] on the side was a little hook that if he wanted to make it close and stay closed he hit that

[Points to a part of his wrist] and it would stay closed. So that now he could do things, at least anyway. So he could write a letter he could clamp the thing down whack and he could write a letter. Or he could go in and open the door, which was wonderful for what they did. That was a new thing too at the time because they didn't have all the modernization that you have today in medicine or any field you look. They can almost take you apart they take your heart now and take it out and give you a new one. That's what unheard of in those days. I was going to go home they said you're pretty good now... I spent about six months there. And if anything happens there is a big hospital that you can go to. They discharged me; I said how do I get home? They say any way you want. So I decided to take a bus. They said, "What do you want to take a bus for?" Well, before that I never left Peabody. To go to Boston is like going to New York in those days. So I took the, I took the thing, the bus all the way to Boston but every big city I came to I'd stop and get off and look around. And then I'd come back with a ticket and they would say you were supposed to be in Boston. Yeah, but I wanted... Okay... See I had the ribbons [Points to his left chest] you know and they look at you. Okay son that's all right and I did that all the way home. I stopped about five times. I saw Chicago, which I never in my God living world though that I'd ever get there to see these big cities.

I finally go home I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I know I wanted to go to school. That was the whole idea. So I started to look around and I went to prep school because I was away from school for about four years. So I went to Berkeley Pre and I did pretty good there. I though I'd forget everything but you know I had this Dr... White an old-timer they had all retired teachers there because they were all going to war and he encouraged me to go go. Do what you can do and don't be afraid. He says, go ahead so I said... I felt better after that. He was about 86 years old because there was nobody there. They had to get these people in to teach there. I get back in and decided I'd like to go to college, so I did. I was at BU for a while and after I got my three years there, which I needed at that time to get into podiatry college. So I went there and went there and put four years got my degree. And then I decided surgical end of it. I took another year just on surgery. And then I got back and started practice, which

was wonderful it worked good for me. I did, I was making a good living. I loved what I was doing. After that I says to myself "Well, at least out of all of this bad, a lot of good came." I got my education; I'm doing what I want to do. And I felt real good.

And from then on out just took it easy. Then I retired. Now that I'm retired we go south because I love to hit that little ball around. I love to golf now. I'm a nutty golfer. We do a lot of golfing, and we get out a lot, which we never did before because it was hard. And after that I said what more do I need now, really. I've got a wonderful wife... married now... 56 years we've been married. We have one daughter and she went to college and she's doing well for herself. She's married and has two children and had one [her child had a child] and now I'm a great grandfather, which is... I was just sky high when that happened. We have them at the house a great deal. We play together and we take them out, and I enjoy life that's what I'm doing now. Very happy and God's been good to me. From all those sad experiences a lot of good came out of it. And I'm very happy. Thank you.

GG: After all the events at Pearl Harbor happened how did you feel and what did you think about...

JC: I felt very, very...oh you can't... the amount of, I think if I had a knife in my hand and I saw one of those people, and we use to call them slant eyes, which is not nice, but I think I'd put it in them regardless because... you see all those kids my own age too at that time that were killed or injured and got deformities out of it. I just didn't have any, but you know, as time went on it wears off. Got to make things work. So it didn't bother me that much. You know, I could live with it.

GG: So, when exactly did you get to Hawaii and what kind of training did you go through before you went there?

JC: Well... Let's see, it was, I left, I think in August of 40... yeah 40... yeah I think it was August, no later than that. I had no training in the states. And I was in the states about two weeks before I'm out to the island of Hawaii. Oahu is where we were staying there. Training there we didn't have much of anything to speak of because the

field was new and they was trying to put things together. We first get there... we slept in tents. There were not enough facilities in the one barrack that they had. They were nice they built them off the ground and they had floors and they went up. You could make a living out of the thing and still enjoy life. So then, we had a little training on how to... get say a group of guys together... how to march, how to turn and how to fire the gun. Not a rifle, a pistol and that's the amount of my training. I really had no... real... you know, I was gonna go back, I was hoping to go back to flight school, but I never made it. They, bye, you're going to go home. They discharged me at Bushnell General Hospital in Utah. And that's when decided that I'm going to see the world. And I got the bus to come home.

GG: Hawaii is very different from Peabody, how did you like it?

JC: It was nice it was nice. And it's all that the movies make it to be. There's places that you can go and do there was hardly any modern vehicles there at that time. They just didn't compare to what we have in the states, but you get use to it, you live it. All and all when it was all over... I had a lot of animosity towards them. But then you stop to think they were there no more than I was there. The big guys told them they were going to do this and they did it. You learn to live with it, really. I find that feeling that I didn't want them near me gradually dissipated. I still always had resentment there that never left me.

GG: Did you have much free time in Hawaii and if you did what did you do? Did you get out a lot?

JC: Yes. We had free time, but not as much as you'd think. We were so busy trying build our area up, it was new. We were building a new barracks and everything there. We would go into Honolulu itself and we used to go to Waikiki Beach. And of course we'd loved to go to beaches because you also have the beautiful girls there, you know. And so most of us worked out. We had to say in condition. With irons and everything, we really did. They kept you in conditions had to lean to run a few miles too, so that you were physical fit. We'd go done and look around. We didn't do much because we didn't have any money in our pockets. So what do you do you look and then you go away. It was okay I

truthfully say. I got friendly with two fellas John... John [Unclear] from Pennsylvania and Bill from New York. And because we liked to do the same things we became a little more attached where we do things together. We'd go to town; go to the beach go to the movies you'd find something to do. Whatever little time you had you had to use it. You're going back again and you know what you're doing when you get back. So, we did it. And it worked out it worked out. But it took me a long time to get over what I saw there. I could not sleep at night, very little. I'd wake up and oh my god as if I'm going through it all over it again. They sent me to the physiatrist. He looked at me and said "You'll get over it son after awhile. But you have to work at it." And the medication and things that they had in those days is nothing what they had today. So a lot of it was from your heart. Do what you think is right and do it. That's what I did.

GG: When you got your discharge papers how did that make you feel?

JC: Wonderful! You know, I felt that... I liked when I was in the service don't get me wrong. They were good to us. I can't complain on that. It was friendly it was different than the regular army because we did things differently in the Air Corps we didn't have all the stuff they did over there. To tell you the truth, I never fired a rifle. All the time I was there because we didn't need a rifle. You couldn't carry one. So you carried your revolver and that was part of your equipment. You never left without your, as I said before, revolver, gasmask and your helmet had to be with you at all times.

GG: So, when you first got back to Massachusetts, can you describe in detail what you did?

JC: Yeah. When I first got back [Short pause] things had changed here to. I thought about the same things before I left but, now this about two and a half years afterwards, and things had changed. They were living differently because of the war. And a lot of the fellas my age had gotten into... when I got home there were hardly any of them around. There were just a few of us that were there that were my age because of that. It was different it was different... It changed your life. Although we went out we

did things... We used to go to dances, which I love to dance, I'd dance, and we would do the same things more or less. But, you didn't have that enthusiasm because you know Joe was going to go out now, and is he going to come back. Because you've been there and you know what he's going to go through. But you finally [Pause] you work out of it; it doesn't happen overnight. It just takes time. How long, everybody's different. But I finally got over it thank God. I got my education, my practice I did well for myself. So I was very happy. To me it was bad on this end [Using his left hand] but it finally came out beautiful on the other end [Using his right hand]. So it paid for itself all along. I really can't feel bad about everything because, hey, it was done and were still here, and we're enjoying life. I have a wonderful wife and I've got one daughter and I had everything I really wanted.

GG: Where did you get your degrees from?

JC: I got it from Ohio College of Podiatric Medicine out in... Ohio. We were right adjacent to University Circle there was Case University, which was the women's college and there was Western Reserve [Pointing towards the interviewer], the medical school was right beside it, so we had a wonderful area there.³ And we worked together. You got to know there... I remember this one time their anatomy lab broke down so they came over to our place, so they came over they used our place. If anything happened here we would go there. It was very, very corporative among all the schools there; very enjoyable, but I still missed being home. I had been away for so long I says "I'm sick of this." But anyway, I got out and came back and I set up my practice I stayed about forty years; I did well. Good family, I can do things I want to do now. I'm retired. We can go south every year. It's enjoyable. But you earned it you earned it in those days. Now everybody is a little different; they do things differently. We were very conservative, which we had to do. But it did work out, but I'm very happy, I've retired now; I've been retired for ten years and oh boy it's wonderful.

³ Ohio College of Podiatric Medicine is located in Independence, Ohio near Cleveland, OH. In 2011 the College merged with Kent State University.

GG: Did you meet your wife while you were at school or did you meet her in Massachusetts?

JC: In Massachusetts. She was in school, but we never, and lived a few houses from her, but we never thought about looking at those. We're going to go to the other girls out in Marblehead or you go to Danvers or whatever. We loved to dance so we went to Salem a lot. There were a couple of dance halls. We'd dance then we get though and see you next week and we went home and we had a good time. That's all it was it was, very simple. It was nice.

GG: All in all, how much did they war and your experiences impact you and your life?

JC: I think it had a great impact on me. Bad at first, but good after because you live to learn with these things that happened and you have to keep going forward because if you stop you're gonna go no place. You're just going to go down. And it's very fortunate that I had a couple of beautiful professors while I was in college. Who saw, we were the first ones back. So they really went out to help us. There was this one girl that was a professor... she was a young girl I don't remember her name right now, but she taught math and I had a little trouble with math because we had to take all the things over again when we went, algebra, geometry, trigonometry the whole thing. She got to me... the reason she got to like us was her husband just went into the service, and she knew I was an ex-serviceman. We got a little bit close to talking. She did an awful lot to get me going, and I graduated with honors; I almost fell over. I figured if I'm going to get through this... But with the right people pushing you there is nothing that's not attainable. You can do it if you want to do it bad enough. I'd say to anybody if you may have had a lot of bad luck and you think is going... Don't give up because there is always there is always a little light at the end of the tunnel, and it is bigger the closer you get to it. And you feel better after it is all done.

GG: We are going to wrap this up. Is there anything thing you'd like to say on top of what you're already said?

JC: Well not too much. Just, what I'd like to say to any of the youngsters that have problems... don't give up. There's

always somebody you should get somewhere that will help you, but you gotta to go after it and look at it. It is not going to come to you. Got out and get it, and if you do.. when it's all over you're going to enjoy it more because you had to work so hard; you had to do things that you had to give up you couldn't stay with your studies. In the long run it pays off tremendously. And I'd advise anybody who has those types of problems... stick with it. Get help if you have to. Mental help or whatever it is, stay with it, get a good man, and if you find a nice girl, like I did, she was good to me. She kept me going and a couple of time I felt like I had it and she say "wait a minute now"... and it worked out. I'm now very happy. I couldn't ask for anything more and thank God he was good to me. And that's how I feel.

GG: Thanks a lot for coming and we appreciate...

JC: Thank you for allowing me and the privilege to come up and talk and I hope, if somebody sees this, maybe they can get a little encouragement, and keep going because it's worth every penny when it's all over.

GG: Okay, thanks.

JC: You're welcome.

